

Oregon

Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program

Malheur Basin Habitat Priorities

Biological Description

Malheur River flows nearly 200 miles from its headwaters in the Strawberry Mountains to its confluence with the Snake River. It includes several major tributaries, the Middle, North, and South Fork Malheur and Willow Creek. The Malheur is an important non-anadromous eastside river for bull trout recovery, with the North Fork having the primary habitat. Restoration of feeding, overwintering, and migratory habitat has been identified as a primary objective for bull trout recovery in the Malheur. A key need is to screen irrigation ditches so that fish can move up and down river without getting trapped in them.

The Harney basin contains Malheur National Wildlife Refuge and its abundant spring migratory bird habitats. Core habitats are contained within the ~200,000-acre refuge, however, private irrigated hay lands north of the refuge provide shallow flooded habitats used seasonally by sandhill cranes, long-billed curlews, and other waterfowl. The Silvies River, a low gradient, deeply entrenched system that terminates in Malheur Lake, is basin's major waterway. Fish habitat opportunities in the Silvies are very limited due to introduced carp in the lower river, but riparian & floodplain connectivity is key for avian use. The Blitzen River, mainly contained within the refuge, was ditched and straightened for agricultural purposes by the turn of the century. The refuge portion contains native willow and dogwood riparian vegetation which provides excellent neotropical migrant habitat and supports a quality interior redband trout population.

Uplands are characterized by expansive sage brush communities, including a portion of the sage grouse range in Oregon. Private lands are located in key areas for partnerships such as along major waterways, floodplains, and wetlands. Threats to habitat come from recreation, loss of ranching operations, invasive species, inappropriate livestock management, and development.

Priority Habitats/Key Resources

Bull Trout Passage & In-Stream Habitat	Shrub-Steppe
Riparian & Floodplain Habitat	Migratory birds (upland & wetland dependent)
Permanent and seasonal wetland basins	Malheur NWR

Focus species: Bull trout, interior redband trout, greater sage grouse, pygmy rabbit, migratory wetland and riparian birds, nearly 60 species of shrub steppe and grassland birds.

Important Factors

The High Desert region offers the Service unique opportunities to work within the ranching and agricultural communities to provide leadership, technical assistance, and funding to proactively restore stream, wetland and sagebrush steppe habitats *while* sustaining healthy rangeland to benefit grazing.

Current Partners program activity in the High Desert has been focused primarily on stream restoration and fish passage in the Malheur River. Intra-service cross program efforts will vastly expand partnership opportunities by initiating a process to optimize program efficiency by capitalizing on field office and refuge expertise, location, and local contacts. While this focus area is still in the partnership development phase, substantial gains have been made in the communities and with local watershed councils, SWCDs, state and federal partnerships, and landowner interest. Numbers of fundable projects meeting PFW criteria are expected to increase each year.